

VZCZCXRO5977
OO RUEHBI RUEHCI RUEHLH RUEHPW
DE RUEHCI #0063 0450716
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
O 140716Z FEB 06
FM AMCONSUL CALCUTTA
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 0777
INFO RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI IMMEDIATE 0727
RUEHCG/AMCONSUL CHENNAI 0285
RUEHBI/AMCONSUL MUMBAI 0285
RUEHKA/AMEMBASSY DHAKA 0164
RUEHKT/AMEMBASSY KATHMANDU 0169
RUEHGO/AMEMBASSY RANGOON 0090
RUEHIL/AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD 0115
RUEHLH/AMCONSUL LAHORE 0059
RUEHPW/AMCONSUL PESHAWAR 0045
RUEHKP/AMCONSUL KARACHI 0061
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC
RHEFDHP/DIA DHP-1 WASHINGTON DC
RHHMUNA/CDR USPACOM JECG HONOLULU HI
RUEHCI/AMCONSUL CALCUTTA 0952

UNCLAS CALCUTTA 000063

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE
SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [SOCI](#) [ASEC](#) [IN](#)

SUBJECT: ASSAM POLICE SHOOT VIOLENT PROTESTORS DEMONSTRATING AGAINST
A MILITARY CUSTODIAL DEATH

¶1. (U) On February 10, nine people were killed in the Northeast Indian state of Assam when police opened fire on demonstrators protesting the death of suspected United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) supporter Ajit Mahanta while in Indian Army custody.

On February 5, the Indian Army detained Mahanta in Kakopathar, Tinsukia district. The following day, the Army sent his dead body in a jute bag to the Assam Medical College and Hospital, Dibrugarh. An irate crowd of 20,000 villagers from the Kakopathar area, an ULFA stronghold, marched to the local police station, broke down barricades and lynched a police officer. In response, the police opened fire and killed six women and two men. Another police officer was also killed in the fighting. On February 13 and 14, ULFA and the All Assam Students' Union (AASU) called a general strike (bandh) to protest the killings. The police also imposed an evening curfew.

¶2. (U) The Army claimed Mahanta died of injuries while trying to escape. A Brigadier was appointed to investigate the incident and a Major and a Captain already have been relieved of their commands. General Officer Commanding, Eastern Region Lieutenant General Arvind Sharma personally visited Mahanta's family to express the GOI's condolences. He also gave Rs.100,000 compensation, assured her a job, a house and education of her children. On February 11, Congress President Sonia Gandhi, who was visiting Assam to formally start the ruling Congress Party's campaign for the state Assembly elections in May 2006, expressed her regret over the deaths and promised stern action against the officials involved. The state government also announced Rs. 300,000 compensation for the families of the police shooting victims.

¶3. (SBU) Mahanta's death is a clear indication that military actions against ULFA suspects has not stopped, despite initial talks between the GOI and the ULFA representative People's Consultative Group (PCG). While ULFA chief Paresh Barua condemned the incident, called for a bandh and more demonstrations, he did appeal for an avoidance of violence. Police contacts believe that Barua wants to pressure the GOI to stop operations against ULFA and begin a ceasefire. The Assam Congress Party, which governs the state, has also been pressuring the GOI to negotiate more with ULFA and to have the military institute a ceasefire, in an attempt to garner greater public support in the run-up to the state Assembly elections.

14. (SBU) COMMENT: The recent deaths are a serious challenge to the weakening political position of the Congress Party in Assam but its political opponents appear more fragmented and less able to capitalize on the potential political fall-out. In addition, the Congress at the National and State level has been very quick at damage control, pressuring the Army to apologize and providing relatively generous compensation packages. While Congress may lose some support, these deaths alone will not result in the Party losing control of Assam.

JARDINE